WILDSTORM UNIVERSE

#9
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Suggested For Mature Readers

sleeper™

ED BRUBAKER season two

SEAN PHILLIPS

Sean
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Wildstorm.com

Déjà Vu All Over Again

IS ALL THIS SHIT REALLY NECESSARY?

YES.

CAN YOU LIGHT ME A SMOKE, THEN? THEY'RE IN MY INSIDE JACKET POCKET...

NO.

LISTEN, COLE, YOU JUST SPENT A YEAR ON YOUR ASS, SO FORGIVE ME IF I WANNA MAKE SURE YOU'RE IN ***PROPER WORKING ORDER*** BEFORE I.O. PUTS YOU ON THE PAYROLL.

LET'S NOT GO NUTS HERE, SLAYTON... I SAID I'D DO A FEW ***FREELANCE*** GIGS, AND THAT'S ***IT.***

I REMEMBER WHAT I.O. WAS FROM BACK IN THE ***DAY...***

...AND I'M NOT LOOKING TO BECOME ANY SERIOUS PART OF ALL YOUR AND LYNCH'S CLOAK AND DAGGER ***BULLSHIT.***

I JUST WANT A LITTLE SOMETHING TO GET ME OFF THIS ***DAYTIME SOAPS*** ADDICTION.

JOKE ALL YOU WANT, ***GRIFTER,*** BUT IF YOU COME TO WORK FOR US IN ANY CAPACITY, YOU BETTER TAKE IT SERIOUS AS A FUCKING HEART ATTACK.

WE'RE DEALING WITH THE FATE OF THE ***FREE WORLD*** ON A DAY-TO-DAY BASIS.

JESUS, YOU ***REALLY*** DRANK THE KOOL-AID THIS TIME, DIDN'T YOU, MARC?

HOW DOES HE LOOK, DOCTOR?

LOTS OF ***OLD*** FRACTURES, BUT HIS BONE DENSITY SEEMS MORE THAN SATISFACTORY, SURPRISINGLY SO...AND NO TORN LIGAMENTS OR ATTACHMENTS ANYWHERE.

IN SHORT--HE MAY LOOK LIKE HE'S BEEN BEATEN TO ***HELL*** AND BACK ON THE OUTSIDE, BUT INSIDE HE SEEMS ***FINE.***

HIS LUNGS EVEN LOOK CLEAN.

SEE? CAN I GET THAT ***CIGARETTE,*** NOW?

SURE, YOU CAN SMOKE IT ON THE WAY TO THE FIRING RANGE...

PUT YOUR CLOTHES ON AND LET'S GO SEE IF YOU'VE STILL GOT WHAT IT ***TAKES.***

CHRIST, NOW WHO'S FUCKING WITH ***WHO,*** SLAYTON?

YOU WANNA PUT SOME MONEY DOWN, MAKE THIS INTERESTING?

I'M A CIVIL SERVANT, COLE, I CAN'T AFFORD TO MAKE ***ANYTHING*** INTERESTING.

IS THAT *HIM?*

YEAH, THAT'S OUR GUY.

THAT SAD FUCK IS THE *GRIFTER?* YOU SURE? GUY'S A FUCKING *LEGEND...*

TRUST ME, IT'S HIM.

I COULD TAKE *THAT* GUY.

NO. YOU *COULDN'T.*

LET'S JUST TRY TO KEEP HIM IN OUR SIGHTS AND NOT GET *SPOTTED.*

HE MAY NOT LOOK LIKE MUCH, BUT HE'S GOT THIRTY-FIVE YEARS MORE EXPERIENCE THAN ANYONE YOU EVER MET.

WHAT'S TAO *WANT* THIS BITCH FOR ANYWAY?

I'M SUDDENLY SUPPOSED TO KNOW WHY TAO DOES *ANYTHING* HE DOES? ALL I KNOW IS, TAO AND GRIFTER...

...THEY'VE GOT A *HISTORY...*

Of course, that's putting it mildly as hell. And it's leaving out the fact that I have a pretty good idea of why Tao wants to get his hands on this man.

Because a few years and a whole lifetime ago, I had a chance to get out...back when I was still UNDERCOVER, or when I thought I was, at least.

And the guy we're following, he doesn't even know it, but he took that chance AWAY.

Because he SHOT Lynch.

Put him in a coma for over a year, and by the time he woke up, it was just too damn late.

But like I said, he doesn't even KNOW...

...because Tao thought it would be funnier that way.

Funny to fuck with his head, make him try to kill one of his only friends and then forget the whole goddamn thing.

He's a house of cards for the bastard now; one word from Tao is all it'll take to bring him crashing down.

Which is why we're here. Tao wants to break him again, get inside his head and screw it up some more...

Set him on another collision course with Lynch.

I have to admit, once again Tao has seen all the angles. He could've killed Grifter, but instead he left him out here...wandering around clueless.

And Pitbull is right, the guy IS a legend.

He looks my age, but that's just a latent effect of his exposure to the Gen-Factor back in the 70s, when he and Lynch were in Team 7, I.O.'s best BLACK OPS crew.

I can remember my dad and his pals talking about him when I was a kid...

...Cole Cash, the best sharp-shooter on the base, the smart-mouth brawler always one pussy-hair away from the brig.

In some circles, he's even considered a super-hero...he and Tao were both in the Wildcats at some point, before everyone knew what Tao was really about.

The point is, him and Lynch go back a long way, and even though he's considered a bit of a loose cannon...

...he's still one of the few people in the world that Lynch might trust. One of the few people he'll put his guard down around.

Because Lynch doesn't know who shot him any more than Grifter does.

He just thinks it was one of Tao's people, but he's got no real memory of that night...he doesn't know who he was with.

And he's been so focused on me and Tao since he got back into the game that he hasn't stopped to think about it.

The curse of the workaholic, I guess...a curse Tao now plans to take full advantage of.

But the problem is, I have no idea how far Tao wants to take this. He may just want Grifter to rock Lynch's boat from the inside...

...but it's just as likely he'll have him take another SHOT at the old man. And if that happens, all MY plans could go right out the window...

...which is why I tried to talk him out of this yesterday.

FRANKLY, I'M SURPRISED TO BE HEARING THIS FROM YOU, HOLDEN.

I WOULD'VE THOUGHT YOU'D ***ENJOY*** TAKING ANOTHER CRACK AT THE MAN.

LOOK, I'M JUST SAYING YOU'RE PUSHING THINGS A BIT TOO ***FAR***, A BIT TOO ***FAST***, IN MY OPINION...IF THAT MATTERS.

IT ***DOESN'T***, REALLY, BUT ENLIGHTEN ME, ANYWAY.

THE GUY IS A LOOSE CANNON.

YES, YOU GOT INSIDE HIS HEAD AND BENT HIM TO YOUR WILL BEFORE...BUT AS YOU'LL RECALL, IT ***WASN'T*** EASY.

HE'S GOT MENTAL TRAINING THAT BLOCKS A LOT OF YOUR ABILITIES... HE COULD SNAP OUT OF IT AT ANY TIME.

AND IF THAT SHOULD HAPPEN, YOU'RE SUDDENLY ***ALONE*** IN A ROOM WITH ONE OF THE MOST ***DANGEROUS*** MEN ON THE PLANET.

WHO SUDDENLY REMEMBERS *WHY* HE'S BEEN WANTING TO *KILL YOU* ALL THIS TIME.

IT'S AN AMUSING THEORY, I ADMIT, BUT THERE'S STILL ONE THING YOU'RE FORGETTING.

WHAT?

I'VE GOT THE GUN THAT SHOT LYNCH, WITH GRIFTER'S FINGERPRINTS ALL OVER IT.

IF HE REMEMBERS EVERYTHING, HE'LL REMEMBER *THAT*, TOO.

AND HE'LL KNOW THAT IF HE *TOUCHES* ME, THAT GUN GOES STRAIGHT TO LYNCH.

HIS OWN EGO WILL STOP HIM FROM DOING ANYTHING TO HARM ME.

I DON'T KNOW...HE'S *CRAZY*, TAO. HE MAY JUST NOT CARE.

I'LL TAKE MY CHANCES.

BUT GRIFTER IS ON THE VERGE OF WORKING *DIRECTLY* WITH LYNCH AGAIN, AND THAT'S JUST TOO DELICIOUS A PROSPECT FOR ME TO PASS UP.

SO, WHY DON'T YOU STOP QUESTIONING YOUR *SUPERIORS*, AND GO BRIEF YOUR TEAM ON THEIR *TARGET*...

SHIT.

WHAT?

HE MADE US.

WHAT'RE YOU TALKING ABOUT?

WHY DO YOU THINK HE JUST DITCHED IT DOWN THAT FUCKING ALLEY? HE'S CHOOSING HIS GROUND.

MAYBE HE'S JUST GOTTA DRAIN THE MAIN VEIN?

BLACKWOLF, GO ***TOPSIDE*** AND COVER THE OTHER SIDE.

IF HE TRIES TO RUN, DON'T LET HIM.

NOT A PROBLEM...

YOU'RE WITH ME, PITBULL, AND ***TRUST ME*** ON THIS ONE...

...HE'S ***NOT*** TAKIN' A PISS.

WHAT THE FUCK D'YOU CALL *THAT*, THEN?

A *SET-UP.*

GET BACK! MOVE!

AH!

NOW, WOLFIE!

FUCK ME...

RRAAOOWWW!

JESUS FUCKING CHRIST...

SO, WHO THE FUCK *ARE* YOU, ASSHOLE?

NO ONE YOU WANT TO KNOW.

AHHHH!

YOU OKAY?

YEAH, ***VEST*** TOOK MOST OF IT... HURTS LIKE ***HELL***, THOUGH. HOW'S ***WOLFIE?***

BLEEDIN' LIKE I JUST GOT MY FUCKIN' ***PERIOD***, BITCH...

GET ME BACK TO BASE, THEY CAN TAKE THIS SHIT ***OUT*** AND I CAN CHANGE BACK.

WE'RE ON OUR WAY...ONE OF YOU WANT TO HELP ME ***CARRY*** THIS ASSHOLE?

...WHU...?

AH, GOOD, YOU'RE FINALLY COMING OUT OF IT...

...AND HERE I WAS AFRAID MY MAN HAD ACCIDENTALLY ***KILLED*** YOU AND TAKEN ALL THE FUN FOR HIMSELF.

OH SHIT...

Like I said, when Tao fucks with your head, he locks you back up and makes sure he's the only one who has the key.

DON'T-- I'M NOT LISTENIN' TO YOUR SHIT, YOU--

OH, COME NOW, COLE, LET'S REASON THIS OUT TOGETHER..

It takes him all of three seconds to get back into Grifter's brain. The poor bastard never had a chance.

NOW THEN, TELL ME ABOUT YOUR ***MEETING*** TODAY AT ***I.O.***

And I've only got ONE CHANCE to throw a monkey wrench into this before Tao sends Grifter out to screw up everything I've been working on.

Thank god I've finally got some back-up.

HOLDEN, YOUR ***CANNON FODDER*** ARE DOWN IN SICK BAY WHINING ABOUT HOW YOU OWE THEM A ROUND OF ***DRINKS*** FOR TONIGHT'S JOB.

SHIT, THEY SHOULD BE BUYING ***ME*** DRINKS, ALL THEY DID WAS GET SHOT.

I'LL BE BACK LATER. CALL ME IF THIS GETS *INTERESTING.*

WHATEVER.

See, the way I figure it, there's one thing that'll buy me the TIME I need to pull off my plans...

WHATEVER.

...the gun that shot Lynch.

The gun with Grifter's PRINTS on it.

If that were to somehow fall into Lynch's hands before Grifter walks into I.O. under Tao's control, then all bets are off.

It's risky, I know, because when Tao FINDS OUT, he's going to KNOW who did this.

Shit, there won't even BE any other suspects.

But I'm counting on his ego to play in my favor, and buy me the time I need to make everything work.

I'm counting on him wanting to draw out his attack... and that's the only reason I trust myself to do this.

And that's where my back-up comes in, too.

Miss Misery managed to distract the guards and hacked into the vault surveillance.

So I can just walk in and out, and no one but her is the wiser.

It's the easiest job I've ever pulled.

At least for now.

I just wish I could see the look on his face when the GENIUS realizes someone ELSE is playing in his game.

But that's the suicidal part of me talking...I ignore it.

Put it in the back of my mind, next to the part that thinks, no matter how good I THINK I am, he's STILL going to be three steps ahead.

I MISS ANYTHING GOOD?

NOT REALLY. GRIFTER GOT A LITTLE ***WEEPY***, BUT WHAT ELSE IS NEW?

Later, Grifter's like a ROBOT, or like someone who just went through SHOCK THERAPY.

Which, in a way, I guess he did.

I can't even tell if he knows I'm the same guy he SHOT a few hours before.

SHOULD I JUST DROP YOU OFF WHERE WE *FOUND* YOU?

SURE...WHERE YOU...FOUND ME...

THAT'S... YEAH...THAT'S FINE.

And as I watch him stumble away into the night, I pray to whatever God usually pisses all over my chances that Tao didn't scramble his brains too much this time.

He's part of MY plan now...and I can't afford anything going wrong.

NO, I DIDN'T APPROVE IT, AND I ***WOULDN'T'VE,*** EITHER.

I'M WELL AWARE OF OUR BUDGETARY RESOURCES, MR. SECRETARY. OF COURSE, I'LL GET THE REPORT OUT FIRST THING IN THE MORNING.

MARINA, WHEN DID ***THIS*** ARRIVE?

A FEW HOURS AGO, COMMANDER LYNCH, BY ***NIGHT MESSENGER.*** SHOULD I HAVE SOMEONE FROM--

NO. OUT. ***NOW.***

CHECK THE BALLISTICS AND RUN IT FOR PRINTS -H

HOW MANY TIMES ARE YOU GOING TO *WATCH* THAT, TAO?

I'M NOT CERTAIN. A FEW MORE, AT LEAST.

I'M ESPECIALLY FOND OF *THIS* PART, WHERE HE LOOKS RIGHT AT THE CAMERA, MAKING SURE IT'S NOT *RECORDING*, I SUPPOSE.

MEN ARE *SO* FUCKING STUPID. EVEN THE *BEST* OF THEM STILL THINK WITH THEIR COCKS.

I MUST HAVE TOLD HIM A HUNDRED TIMES *NOT* TO TRUST ME.

YES, WELL, IT SEEMS YOU WERE *RIGHT* ABOUT OUR MISTER CARVER, IN ANY CASE...NOT THAT I EVER DOUBTED YOU.

SO, WHAT'RE YOU GOING TO *DO* ABOUT IT?

HOLDEN WAS *ALWAYS* GOING TO HAVE TO BE *DEALT WITH*...

...NOW IT'LL JUST HAVE TO BE *SOONER* THAN I PLANNED.

Brubaker*Phillips*Strachan*Leigh*Quinn*Dunbier